

The Castle of Lies

BY ARTHUR HENRY VESLEY

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CHAPTER XIV.

The King's Messenger.

A minute passed and the bedroom door was again opened. Madame de Varnier and Dr. Starva conversed in hurried whispers, the electric light shining full on my face. I moved about restlessly, but did not open my eyes. Presently the woman seated herself at my bedside. Dr. Starva left the room, the door being slightly ajar.

I could not resist the temptation to half open my eyes. Madame de Varnier was praying fervently, regarding with passionate adoration a jeweled cross held before her eyes. A peremptory knock at the door of the drawing-room opening on the corridor put an abrupt end to these devotions, which seemed to me so incongruous. She clasped her hands; she listened, rigid with anxiety. It may be imagined that I myself listened, scarcely less anxious. It was the conclave again.

"Here is the Englishman's card. He says he is a king's messenger. He brings important dispatches. He insists that were his Excellency at the point of death he must have the least place these dispatches in his hands to-night."

"But as his Excellency's physician I forbid it," replied Dr. Starva, with determination.

"And," entreated the woman gliding to the door, "can you not make him understand how disagreeable it would be for me to be surprised in these rooms, and that it would annoy Sir Mortimer beyond measure?"

"It is useless, madam. Have I not told him that embarrassing circumstances make it impossible that his Excellency be officially recognized to-night?"

"And still he insists!" inquired Starva angrily.

"As only the stubborn English can insist. He is outside the door at this moment. He has sent me to you, not to ask permission, but to announce his coming. He refuses to go away until he has seen his Excellency. If the door is not opened in five minutes he will call the manager of the hotel."

"His name?"

"I am giving you his card."

"Captain Reginald Forbes," read Madame de Varnier. "Well, we will admit this Captain Forbes."

I listened to this dialogue with a trepidation that deprived me of power to think or act. That fatal indecision which, on certain occasions, had already brought its tragic penalty again seized me. The crisis impending might leave in its wake consequences too grave to be thought of—might leave me a man disgraced and liable to the extreme penalty of the law. And yet I lay still, in a nightmare of indecision and inaction. It was the same numbness of will that had paralyzed me on the Strategus Pass. Heaven grant that the consequences now be not as disastrous!

I heard the click of a revolver. Then Captain Forbes was admitted to the salon.

"Where is Sir Mortimer Brett?" he demanded haughtily. "I must see him without further delay. May I ask who you are, sir?"

"The physician of his Excellency," replied Starva, bowing. He was no longer attempting to deny that I was Sir Mortimer Brett. "Sir Mortimer is seriously ill. I refuse to permit him to be disturbed. I have brought him here to Vienna, hoping that the air and surroundings may induce him to sleep. It is a nervous disorder that has prostrated Sir Mortimer. He has suffered terribly from insomnia. There are moments when he is delirious. To bring him sleep it was necessary to give him an opiate, you understand. If he is awakened he may be sane or he may deny his very identity."

"Which is his room?"

"Captain Forbes, I forbid it. It is impossible. I warn you."

Madame de Varnier opened the door of the bedroom quietly.

"If the gentleman insists on awakening Sir Mortimer we are powerless," she said gently. "But at least let him not be excited more than necessary, sir."

"I shall endeavor to follow your instructions, madam," said Forbes stiffly. He strode to my bedside. I could imagine with what breathless anxiety the adventurers watched him. Was he sufficiently intimate with Sir Mortimer Brett to denounce me instantly as an impostor?

"Your Excellency!" he said gently. "Your Excellency!"

The immediate danger of discovery was past. At least he had not detected the deception so far. He called me again; he shook my shoulder respectfully. I opened my eyes.

"What is it?" I demanded, bewildered. I am horrified to-day when I think of the facility that was mine in playing this game of intrigue. I looked languidly from Captain Forbes to Madame de Varnier, who had resumed her seat at the bedside. The question was addressed to her.

She took my hand. "This is Captain Forbes, a king's messenger. He has brought you dispatches of importance."

"Ah, yes," I said wearily, and looked at him with dull eyes.

"I am sorry to arouse you, sir. Contempt for the man struggled with respect for his office. But my orders at the Foreign Office were to give you these papers at the earliest possible moment. The business is urgent. May I suggest that you read them at once?"

My eyes unconsciously turned to Madame de Varnier for guidance. She stroked my hand gently.

"Do you not see that he is in no condition to be disturbed to-night?"

she asked indignantly.

For the first time Captain Forbes hesitated. He placed one unburned hand on his breast as if to guard jealously the dispatches he bore. That he should hesitate at all seemed to me incredible. But Captain Forbes seemed a fair example of that type of Englishman who performs his duty with the stubbornness and obstinacy of a fool as well as a hero. Chance often determines which of the two characters he shall assume. It is true he had not the remotest suspicion that I was not Sir Mortimer. But surely he must see that I was in the power of these adventurers.

All my fears reached a climax, when, looking steadily at me a mo-



"Your Excellency!" He Said Gently. "Your Excellency!"

ment, he turned to the others: "Must speak to Sir Mortimer alone."

I saw Starva grasp the revolver concealed beneath his coat. Madame de Varnier silenced the protests on his lips with a meaning glance. She realized the uselessness of further resistance.

"You will not excite him more than necessary," she entreated anxiously. "And you must not be surprised to find his mind still confused as a result of the opiate given him."

"I shall spare him as far as possible," Forbes replied with some sternness. Drawing himself erect, his arms folded, he waited until the door had closed behind him.

My first impulse was to put an end to this farce. But again I hesitated. They were listening outside that door; every suspicion was alert; the slightest cause would fan the suspicion to a flame.

And then, what? I should have made myself ridiculous to no purpose. I had gone far in my reckless venture—too far to risk all by attempting to warn Captain Forbes at this crucial moment. His brain worked too slowly—he was too lacking in subtlety and finesse. I refused—recklessly, if you will, but deliberately—to risk the success of my scheme by drumming into the dull brain of Captain Forbes the true state of affairs. It would have taken him a good quarter of an hour to grasp merely the facts. At that time he would understand just enough of them to be stubbornly convinced that I was equally involved with the other two, but he would think my nerve had failed me and that I was attempting to purchase my own freedom from punishment at the expense of the others. And certainly they would drag me down with them. If for no other purpose than revenge. No; this was not the hour for confidence. Captain Forbes was not the man to be made a confidant at such an hour.

He looked down at me with cold respect. Outwardly I met his steady look with something of fortitude and composure, but beneath the clothes my two hands were clenched rigid.

From a silk bag suspended about his neck he produced two envelopes. He weighed them in his hand a moment; then he placed the bulkier of the two in his silk case. The other he held toward me.

"The Foreign Office, sir, has entrusted to me two dispatches. My orders are to place them in your hands at the earliest opportunity. But one of these dispatches I know to be of great importance. I shall therefore keep it for the present, unless you demand it."

"No, no," I muttered hoarsely, "I cannot receive it now."

"Then to-morrow, sir, I shall hope to find you in better health. Then I shall give you the second dispatch. This one I leave with you now, and may I suggest that you read it at your earliest convenience?"

I took refuge in silence. I closed my eyes wearily.

"Before I bid you good night, sir, I think it right that you should know that your mother and sister are in this hotel. At the risk that you think me impertinent I dare to hope that your meeting with them to-morrow may be free from any embarrassment or unhappiness."

He bowed stiffly and left the room. I stared after him vacantly.

The dispatch he had left, gorgeous and brave with its royal crest and embossing, lay passively in my hand.

And now a new dilemma confronted me. I was supposed to be under the influence of an opiate; they would not scruple to take from me the dispatch. To allow that might give them such information as would make their conspiracy, whatever its nature, the more

effective. To resist would tell them that I had been feigning.

I must hide the papers. But where? It was a bare little chamber; my heart sank as I noted how bare.

I leaped out of bed. Again I threw open the shutters. I could hear Capt. Forbes speaking sternly; if he could but hold them half a minute!

In the garden below the marble basin of a disused fountain at once caught my eyes.

I tore the corner of the envelope, inserted my penknife to weight the packet, leaped over the balcony and dropped it.

It fell squarely into the basin among the leaves and moss.

To regain the room was the work of an instant.

I heard Captain Forbes wish them a cold good night, and Madame de Varnier answer him mockingly. Then the bedroom door was opened and Starva shuffled into the room.

"Who was that man?" I demanded languidly, and regarded him with listless eyes, my hand to my forehead.

He shrugged his shoulders, disdaining to answer.

"He has left some papers here by mistake."

"Perhaps," I muttered indifferently, and pretended to sleep.

I heard him moving about the room for some time. Madame de Varnier and he whispered together. I felt so little concerned as to the result of this search that I actually fell asleep. The strain of the evening had exhausted me. No doubt the search was extended to me personally; I believe I was vaguely conscious of it.

CHAPTER XV.

The Castle of Happiness.

"You sleep soundly, my friend," Dr. Starva was looking down at me with grim intentness.

It was not yet dawn. His immense figure seemed even more huge than it was in this uncertain light. It appeared to threaten, to menace me. And yet I welcomed his presence; at least they had not made their escape.

I looked up at him with cool assurance.

"A light conscience gives deep slumber. Do we start so early?"

"Yes. Your coffee is waiting for you in the salon."

I dressed rapidly. A certain depression would have been natural. The night is the time of foibles; with the morning comes clear thought and prudence. But not so with me. It is true that I detested Dr. Starva. His methods were too gross; his eyes were too closely set together; his mouth too cruel and sensual. I could have wished him out of the game. And yet I believed that this was a match for him.

But this woman who tempted and pitied! This woman whose beauty fascinated and whose treachery repelled! This woman who lied and prayed the same breath!

As I thought of her I was at once furious and eager. I was ashamed to think how eager. I had pledged myself to the cold Diana of my dreams. For her I ran these risks; for her I might be disgraced and a felon. It was her gratitude I coveted; her forgiveness I craved.

And yet for the moment I was seeking the flame and the glamour of the other woman—this warm, mysterious creature of diverse moods.

Her fantastic chateau held out a promise, not of happiness, indeed, but of the joy of doing, of daring.

So as I dressed my spirits were buoyant. The little garden, below, half hidden in the mist that came from the lake, was fresh and charming in the morning dew. Patches of flowers, brave in scarlet and purple and blue, opened their eyes to the dawn. I followed mechanically the gravelled paths, geometric and straight, threading the sparkling lawns.

I looked eagerly down at the battered fountain checked with refuse. I could see no trace of the long, white envelope. It was completely concealed by the leaves.

I found it impossible to rescue the little packet from its hiding place. My hostess and her cousin kept too careful an eye on me for that. But it was a tolerably secure hiding place; and frankly I was not sorry to leave the proof of my complicity behind me.

A faint breeze, cold with the snow of the mountains, fanned my cheek. The poetry of the dawn thrilled me. Before the evening came the placid lake might be lashed into fury. The trees, now gently swaying, might be bent and broken by the violence of the storm. But now the sky was clear. When the storms came I would try to meet them. But before they did come why should I not enjoy the present? I threw open the door and stepped into the salon where coffee and Madame de Varnier awaited me.

I greeted me with vivacity. But I was not blind to the glances that measured. "The fool has no suspicion," the eyes said, while the lips asked how I had slept.

"Admirably," I answered gayly. "And we are to start at once for your Castle of Happiness?"

"You have a sublime faith to still believe it that?" she questioned mockingly as she poured my coffee.

"Why not?" I cried mockingly, in my turn. "Is it not happiness to be with you, madam?"

"Pas des banalités, monsieur," she replied with an impatient gesture. "But you really believe that the tireless journey will repay you?"

"Since I am resolved to hear your secret, yes."

"Oh, ungracious!" She smiled at me ruefully. "I think I prefer an insincere compliment to an awkward truth."

"Madam, it is not I who made the condition."

"Ah, you are a very cautious friend, monsieur."

"I generally try to look before I leap," I returned with composure. "I was not unwilling that she think it curious that prompted me to accept the extraordinary invitation given with so little heed to convention. She had hinted that we were to be of mutual use to each other; but of this I was skeptical. I accepted the invitation precisely in the spirit in which it was given. It would be shocking form, to say the least, to be a guest that one

might have the opportunity to play the detective. But she and I had placed ourselves beyond the pale of conventionality. Either distrusted the other. An armed truce—that was the word that described our relations, and she had suggested that word.

Dr. Starva entered.

"En route," he said gruffly. "The carriage is waiting."

It was very early, scarcely past five. The night porter, drowsy-eyed and sulky, took us down on the elevator and put our luggage in the carriage. I confess I breathed more freely when the hotel was some miles behind us and we had seen neither Helena Brett nor Captain Forbes.

As Madame de Varnier had warned me, the journey itself was long and tiresome; nor did Madame de Varnier and her companion exert themselves much to relieve its monotony.

It was almost dusk when she pointed out to me the pinnacles of her chateau.

For the last hour the horses had been struggling up a dusty road winding about the mountainside. Forests of fir were on either side. From far below came the impetuous murmur of a stream. High above the forests of fir trees there were herds of cattle. We could hear the faint jingle of the cow-bells. Only rarely had there been any view, but the clear and pure atmosphere told me that the altitude must be considerable. But this sylvan scene suggested nothing of the horrors of a few days ago. The mountains, purple and pink in the dusk, were too far away.

Suddenly there was a turn in the road. Now we had an uninterrupted view of the chateau across a green valley. In this vague light its towers and turrets seemed as unreal and ghostly as a fairy fabric.

At the base of its white walls a tiny village, crouching close to the chateau for protection, found a precarious foothold on the steep hillside. There was a maze of red-tiled roofs, high-gabled and sloping, tier upon tier of them, each pierced by numbers of quaint dormer windows.

A wild river, fed by the turbulent streams of the mountain snows, flung itself in headlong rage down the sloping valley, straight for the chateau, as if to sweep it from its base. Reaching the castle, it spent its fury on the rocks, then, as if baffled of its prey, made an abrupt half circle about the base and continued its stormy career, seeking a less powerful foe.

"At last," breathed Madame de Varnier. "Well, my friend, does it promise diversion for you?"

"The village and the castle breathe the spirit of romance," I cried with animation.

"Ah, romance! What if I say to you," she whispered, "that your day of romance has come?"

I glanced toward Dr. Starva whose shaggy head was nodding. "Even we Americans, madam, are not indifferent to its glamour. But too often the romance of medievalism suggests dishonor."

She looked at me startled, then shrugged her shoulders. "One must take the world as one finds it," she said indifferently.

We were making the last steep ascent to the village. We crossed the rocky stream; the driver cracked his long whip; we passed under a dilapidated arch; we were rattling over the cobblestones of a winding street.

It was too dark for me to see much of the quaint beauty of this picturesque village. I caught a glimpse of the timbered Rathaus, its gilt clock proudly conspicuous on the squat tower, and of the fountain in front of it, its basin radiant with scarlet flowers. There were little shops dimly lighted,

either side by the houses of the village; over the arch, too, was a dwelling. Suddenly we emerged in a courtyard large enough to permit a squadron of cavalry to perform its evolutions. A low wall inclosed it. We drew up at the doorway. I was welcomed by Madame de Varnier with exaggerated deference. We were at her Castle of Happiness.

I felt the insincerity of the welcome. They looked on me as a puppet to move only when they pulled the strings. I saw, too, that I had not left in the hotel at Witznau the character of Sir Mortimer Brett.

But before the next day was past I determined to know once for all the reason of this deception. I was determined to put an end to this farce.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Death-Mask Again.

One does not expect to find in Switzerland grace and charm in architecture. There are no historic chateaux worthy of a pilgrimage. This castle of Altorfhorven gave one the same impression of sheer strength. It was primitive and savage and bare of pretense to beauty as its founder must have been.

A rather squat tower of immense solidity, the roof steeply sloping, the windows narrow and few, it would have been commonplace and ugly in the extreme had it not been for three smaller semicircular towers placed at each angle of the larger one. The effect of this triangular-shaped tower, with its three supporting towers, was bizarre, but not unpleasant. It prepared one for an interior unique and interesting.

We passed beneath the arched doorway, severe and bare of ornament, into the great hall. At the left was the grand staircase, the balustrades of oak massive and dark with age, but admirably carved. At the end of the hall, on the right, a fire of logs was blazing brightly. The hooded mantel, Gothic in design, was also of oak and blackened with the smoke of centuries. A stand of banners stood near the foot of the stairway. Not far from the fireplace was a curious spiral staircase leading to the gallery that ran the length of the room above. Tapestries covered the bare walls and filled the spaces between the narrow windows that looked out on the courtyard. The furniture was of the period of the French Renaissance—covered for the most part with stamped leather of gold and dull red.

I could not repress a cry of delight as I entered. I had passed in an instant from the world of commonplace hotels and railway trains into an atmosphere of charm and beauty. For no matter how industriously the connoisseur in America may gather about him exquisite and beautiful things, he cannot shut out the scream of the railroad train; he cannot transplant across the seas the charm of medievalism that clings to castle walls. It is one thing to see the Cluny with a guide book; it is quite another to find one's self a guest at the Cluny.

"You like my Castle of Happiness?" asked Madame de Varnier, pleased at the pleasure I showed.

"It promises its adventures," I replied meaningly.

"I have told you that your hour of romance has come. But remember, romance in these prosaic days is a gift of the gods given only to children and poets, a few women and lovers, and to the very bold. If you would claim the gift, monsieur, you must have something of the nature of all of these. The sincere trust of the child, you must certainly know what this is, monsieur. The poet's imagination, his delightful power of make-believe, you must not despise that. A woman's tenderness, and a lover's ardor, these, too, are necessary. And last of all, the daring of the hero."

She had whispered these rather comprehensive attributes as I walked across the hall to the staircase, following the servant with my bag.

"A rather large bag, madam," I suggested humorously.

"Oh, but I am serious, very serious. I assure you that it is not sentimental talk."

"I am afraid I must contravert you. The daring of the hero, for instance, even one so optimistic as yourself could scarcely expect that of me."

"Monsieur," she protested earnestly. "I have already told you that I refuse to believe you a coward. Do you believe it yourself? You know you do not. The task I am to give you would appall any but the bravest heart. It requires audacity, absolute assurance, and a clever brain. But I believe in you. You will not disappoint me. We dine in half an hour."

Dr. Starva had stood with his back to the fire. He called after me, scowling, as I ascended the stairs:

"You will find, as I have said, that madam is an admirable host. But if the guest is to be quite happy he must accept the diversions madam offers and when they are offered."

It was not the words so much as the tone that menaced. It emphasized the conviction I already felt: Dr. Starva did not welcome my coming to the castle. As I reached the gallery I saw Madame de Varnier address him almost fiercely. I was not blind to his sullen contempt, though evidently the woman on the rug spoke freely.

The suite allotted me was at the end of a gloomy corridor. I threw open one of the narrow windows. The noisy stream below, beating furiously against the walls, almost deafened the voice of the servant as he asked if he could be of assistance to me. I looked out. There was a sheer drop of some 50 feet.

That fact vaguely disconcerted me. The words of Dr. Starva were a jarring note that sobered my excitement. When I had dressed I was almost prepared to find the massive door of my chamber locked or barred. I had entered the spider's web audaciously enough. To escape might be less simple.

The dinner was simply but well served in a small dining-room. Had my situation been less serious I might have felt some humor at my companions for the benefit of the two servants who waited on us. Even Dr. Starva followed the lead of Madame de Varnier.

After in solemn if cynical obedience. But did Madame de Varnier believe me so complaisant a fool, that, like another Bottom, I was expected in this modern Midsummer Night's Dream to accept this deference without question? I became more and more convinced that she did not. Once she even referred to the events of the night before in such a manner that I believed her not ignorant of my true condition. If she were persuaded that I had been acting a part then, that would account for her confidence in expecting me to continue acting that part. It would give her encouragement that I was the willing tool she looked for.

And suppose that she really believed that, did she think that I expected no reward? She had hinted that in serving her ends I was to serve myself as well. But Madame de Varnier was not the kind of woman to believe that a man would be allured by a promise so vague. Then the reward?

She had protested that she had not expected me to fall in love with her. She had protested that, but in the same breath she had confessed a half-resolve to bring me to her feet. Now as she exerted every charm of coquetry she was giving the lie to her own words. Oh, the reward was obvious enough, if I chose to take it.

"We will smoke our cigarettes in my favorite music room. You must hear Dr. Starva play on the cello. You have had the piano carefully tuned, Jacques?"

"All is in readiness," replied the servant, as he preceded us with candles.

Dr. Starva had pushed back his chair eagerly. For the first time since I had met him his face lost something of its heavy sullen expression.

"My fingers have not the practice," he said modestly, "but to play with Madame de Varnier—ah, that is worth while."

We were in the music room that Madame de Varnier had described to me so enthusiastically the day before.

Dimly lighted with wax candles, paneled in dark oak to the ceiling, the floor waxed and polished to a dazzling luster, it was a room almost bare, but it had its melancholy charm. There was little furniture. At one end of the room was a row of carved seats built into the wall. There were no pictures or tapestries. The one touch of color was the vivid flame of blazing logs.

"The strife of the world, its lies and its shame, I leave behind when I enter here," said Madame de Varnier sentimentally. "Look! I throw upon this easel the noisy cares of my voice. Beyond, you see the moonlight on the valleys, and still beyond, the mountains. This is your seat. Once this was a chapel; in these carved seats the monks chanted vespers; in the seat of honor which you occupy drowsed the father superior. When you hear the enchanting melody of Dr. Starva you will not have lived in vain."

This hour at least was innocent. Perhaps it was the full before the storm, but why should I look for clouds when the heavens were clear?

The long, darkly paneled room, its shining floor seeming to rise and fall mysteriously in the flickering firelight, the noisy murmur of the stream below, the white moonlight that struggled feebly through the casement windows—all had its charm. And these two adventurers, unscrupulous and conscienceless, had abandoned themselves for the moment to the joy of their music.

I looked over toward Madame de Varnier. The shaded light of the candles fell on her white shoulders. The splendor of her beauty had never seemed more seductive.

I asked myself incredulously if this dreaming woman was the desperate adventuress whom Locke had warned me against.

Slowly she looked where I sat; I seemed to draw her eyes toward me. She smiled vaguely, a smile that was adorable—yes, I could almost persuade myself that it was the smile of an innocent girl. For a moment I was content to forget the unpleasant task that was before me; to live over the monster by her side in the garb of humanity.

The servant who had shown me to my rooms appeared at the door, letters on his salver. I held up my hand warningly to him that he should not disturb them, and motioned that he bring the letters to me. He did so without either of the musicians noticing his entrance.

The sonata of Beethoven swept to its glorious climax. I started to my feet to take the letters to Madame de Varnier.

But without a pause Dr. Starva began a tender romance. The woman sat at the piano, her hands falling idly to her lap.

Again she smiled across the room at me. But now it was no longer spontaneous. The lips held something of that indefinable cruelty of that woman of the Renaissance made famous by Da Vinci. I frowned; I refused to meet that smile.

Then, as I looked down deliberately, I felt myself turn pale. A shudder convulsed me.

I was gazing in horror at an envelope that bore the interdicted stamp of Bulgaria, the death-mask.

Did she know the ghastly significance of that double stamp? Was she one of the desperate band that had doomed Ferdinand?

I resolved to play a hazardous experiment. I would thrust that stamp under her eyes without warning. Concomitant actress though she was, she would find it difficult to repress a tremor if she were guilty.

Dr. Starva's head was still bent lovingly over his cello. I reached the piano without disturbing him.

I placed the letters in front of Madame de Varnier, the envelope that bore the death-mask on the top of the little pile. I watched her closely.

She took the letters carefully in her hands. The stamp at once arrested her attention. She regarded it with a frank curiosity. She even called my attention to it.

"It is one of the new issues," she

whispered, so as not to disturb Dr. Starva, and continued to sort her letters.

I was almost convinced of her innocence, but not quite. I had yet my experiment to play.

She had opened one of the letters and was engrossed in its contents. As for Dr. Starva, he was lost to the world.

I took the envelope that bore the mysterious symbol, and placing it in such a manner that the death-mask could be most easily seen by the woman, I began to trace the likeness of Prince Ferdinand, meanwhile watching her intently.